

BRAVE CHARLIE.

AN INCIDENT ON THE WEST COAST.



WAIMANGAROA is one of the busiest mining townships in New Zealand, and its claim to be considered one of the most picturesque spots in the world will be upheld by all who have seen and can appreciate its rugged beauty. It must be admitted, however, that where the *auri sacra fames* entices the adventurous, there, *notens volens*, must nature be dismantled of her garments and jewels. And such is the case with Waimangaroa, but the wild grandeur of its scenery has depreciated so little, despite the destructive hand of cultivating man, that nature can still hold up her queenly head and say, "Here am I seen at my best, behold my beauty and marvel!" I care not how facile the pen, how cultivated the mind, how susceptible the writer may be in describing the marvellous scenes which on every side delight the eye of the observer, he could never do justice to this sublime panorama. One must see to know, to feel, and to appreciate. It is easily reached being only eleven miles distant from Westport. 'Twas here that the events which I am about to relate took place. Waimangaroa then bore a different aspect from now. Railways were only dreamt of; mighty steam-engines were unsummed; and the great works of the present illumined not the vision of the most imaginative. A few gold diggers' tents and huts with their little gardens, and a single store were all the habitations that lay scattered here and there on each side of the Waimangaroa River.

As this river is an important feature in my story I must tell you something about it. River is a misnomer, for it was nothing but a creek meandering through huge boulders and jutting rocks, and having on each side lofty craggy mountains, whose sylvan breasts and Alpine crests tunretted into the space above like so many Alantean castles of a weird Homeric imagination. During the dry seasons this limpid feeder of the toiling billows could be forded in several places by merely springing from stone to stone, and the diggers searched in its bed for gold; but a few hours of West Coast rain sufficed to metamorphose it into a wildly roaring, rushing, rapid, turbulent torrent, whose mighty force would be aided by the wealth of forest it stole from the banks as it pursued its angry course to the sea.

At the time we write of no bridge afforded the inhabitants safe passage from bank to bank, although a wire rope, to which a kind of cradle was attached, had been thrown across the river and secured on either side to a stout black birch. By means of this cradle one person with a few small parcels could pull him or herself across. On the left hand side of the river lived the only married couple in Waimangaroa at the time. The husband had built a comfortable slab hut with thatched roof, and fenced it and a garden of about a quarter acre in, so as to keep the fowls and goats from destroying their vegetables. This work had been done on Sundays, or during the rainy weather, which prevented his search for gold. The wife attended to her small family of three—two girls and a boy—the garden, the fowls, and the goats. About half a mile further up were the huts of three other miners, mates of Jim Burton, the married man. On the right hand side were about a dozen tents and huts, and the afore-mentioned store, which had recently been erected and kept by a German named Charlie Terrapax, the hero of my story. Before Charlie had established himself there the hardy diggers were compelled to carry all essential requirements on their broad backs a distance of about ten miles through a dense bush, and by means of a weary rugged path.

On the 3rd of July, 1870, it became known among the diggers about Waimangaroa that Charlie Terrapax had received a large supply of merchandise, including four five-gallon kegs of Nahr's best beer, and three cases of Hennessy's brandy. As it was near the end of the month the diggers decided to 'wash up,' sell the gold to Charlie, who collected same for the banks, get in a supply of necessaries, and enjoy themselves with the contents of the beer kegs and the brandy cases.

It must be here mentioned that as police authority was out a par with nonentity at that time, and as no hotels were then in vogue, liquor was disposed of without asking the permission of the Licensing Bench.

The next day about fourteen of those good old-fashioned diggers—alas! that they are becoming rare—met at Charlie's store. The night was spent in carousing. Next morning the fine weather, which had lasted for five weeks, ceased, and the rain came down in torrents. After their night's spree the men, who seldom had the opportunity of enjoying such a luxury, were altogether unwilling to return home, although they had their supply of stores carefully packed in their wagons. Charlie told them to retrench their steps on account of the heavy flood that would soon be pouring down, but in vain. Among the diggers present was Jim Burton, who, with that recklessness so common among diggers, determined to enjoy himself as well as his bachelor friends, although he was aware of the fact that his family were in the utmost need of provisions. But what recked he! It is seldom that these poor fellows have the opportunity of enjoying themselves; why should they fail to embrace such a splendid chance of becoming intoxicated and having some jolly fine fun? The rain couldn't last much longer than a few hours more, and the river would soon go down. What was the use of going so far as the wire-crossing and incur such danger before reaching it, when they could easily wade across the next day? Such were the thoughts that permeated their simple and honest minds. The next day came, and still no sign of change in the weather. The rain poured and poured and poured. Jupiter Pluvius appeared to have opened the flood-gates of his Olympian abode with such vehemence as if he desired a second deluge. The seething waters poured down the Waimangaroa with increasing velocity and impetus. The next day came, and still no change in the weather. Soon the river had overflowed its banks, and was still rising. It was then Charlie thought of the danger of Mrs Burton and her family. If immediate help were not

forthcoming they would be washed away. So Charlie asked Burton and a few others to come with him, and they would cross on the wire and succour the poor unfortunates on the other side, for, as could be plainly seen, the water was already level with the hut, and the bank was being torn away. The river was, however, so high now that it was a most dangerous undertaking; besides, Charlie could not rely much on his companions, whose brains were belogged with their reckless limbing of the heavy spinnings.

It was a difficult task they had to perform. On they went for about half-a-mile until they reached Con's Creek—called after an old digger who has resided there for the last twenty years. But here the road became so dangerous that Charlie persuaded his friends to remain behind while he would make his way across and do the best he could. Over immense granite boulders twenty and thirty feet high; creeping along the jagged sides of the mountain, where death stared him in the face at every step, and where a false movement meant a terrible doom too horrible to contemplate; now swinging from one pendant branch to another; now wading waist deep in the infuriated water while he felt the stones giving way beneath his feet, now crawling carefully along on hands and knees while muddy masses of water were jerked through the concussion of some large boulder against another over him, thereby half drowning and blinding the hardy fellow. Many a time he was tempted to turn back, but the thought of the helpless woman and her young children on the other side urged him on. If he left them to their fate their ending would be a terrible one, for the little flat on which their hut stood was already inundated, and it would be impossible for them to save themselves by climbing the precipice, with its armament of nude and scraggy rock, which towered up to the skies from behind their little garden.

On, on he must, though almost overcome with the exertions he was compelled to use. Luckily he had provided himself with a flask of cognac, and taking a little, he felt refreshed, and pursued his perilous journey. Another hundred yards and he should reach the wire. These last hundred yards were the very worst, but he accomplished them torn, bruised, wet, and tired.

And, good Heavens! what was his reward for his bravery? His errand had been in vain; the wire-rope had vanished. One of the birch trees to which the wire had been fastened had been torn out by the roots by the fierceness of the downward rush of this violent flood. Charlie rested himself for a while, and pressed his hands to his head in despair.

'My God!' he exclaimed, 'have I come all this way for nothing? And must I, weary and worn, and so bruised and bleeding, and so sick and tired, hurry back to those drunken louts? Yes, yes! I must summon all my strength for the sake of that poor unfortunate woman and her helpless children. Surely something can be done to save them. It must be done! It must be done! God help me and them!' And then the sturdy heroic Charlie faced danger and death again. Once more that awful way was pursued. At last he reached his store thoroughly worn out, but still he refused to give way to the distressing call of health and nature. He told the men the unhappy state of affairs.

They had now become fully sensible of the great danger in which Burton's family found themselves. Something must be done to rescue them, but what? What could they do? No feasible plan entered their heads, and they appealed to Charlie's intelligence, whose late brave attempt had infused both awe and respect into their rugged breasts. Charlie cogitated for a while, and then revealed to them the only plan he could conceive, and it was that some one must carry a line across the river and construct a means of passage similar to the one which had been washed away further up. A couple of clothes lines should be tied firmly together, and one end fastened around the waist of him who should cross while his comrades held the other end; then a larger rope would be tied to the line, pulled across the river, made secure to a large tree on either side, and a large basket, which Charlie had in his store, and to which also a line would be fastened, placed on the rope, and used as a means of transit.

It was all very well to think out such a plan, but who was to put it into execution? It would be deliberate suicide to attempt to cross that tremendous flood. Look at it! It was now about twenty feet deep, turmolling and surging rushing on with a velocity of a hundred miles an hour; huge boulders weighing thirty and forty tons were dashing against each other like so many thunderbolts; logs and trees thundered against rock and bank, and crashed as if they were common matchwood or were carried along with terrific impetuosity towards the sea. What! would any man be so venturesome and mad as to attempt it? No, it was impossible. No mortal could live in that tempestuous flood for five seconds without being dashed to atoms. No, something else must be attempted. But what, God only knew.

Thus reasoned Charlie's companions, who, be it said, were by no means deficient in courage; few diggers lack that noble virtue; for is not their whole life passed amid dangers which would appal many a man whose history has immortalised on account of great deeds of daring? But to attempt to cross that turbulent river appeared to them a useless waste of human life, and they told Charlie so.

'Very well, boys,' said he, 'that is the only way to save those poor people over there,' and if they are not rescued before another hour has passed, that hut of yours, Burton, will be swept away as if it were made of straw, and what will then become of your wife and little ones? After my futile journey to the wire-crossing I feel done up, or else I would endeavour to aid them, or perish in the attempt.'

Everyone present knew that Charlie was not boasting, but meant just what he said.

'Now, some of you fellows,' Charlie cried, 'are you going to let those poor people over there drown before our very eyes without doing your best to help them?'

'But, Charlie,' exclaimed Burton, who was naturally the most interested, 'if anything were possible I should do it. I would give my life willingly for theirs if I thought I could help them, but I would only be throwing away my life if I attempted to swim through that flood without doing any good. And besides, I cannot believe that God would inflict such punishment on me and my family as to let them drown before my eyes. God is good, and he will do something to help them.'

'Yes, Jim,' replied Charlie, 'that is all very nice, but God helps those who help themselves, and if none of you will make the venture I will.' And he meant it. 'Now, boys, look sharp! Get some clothes lines and the long coil of inch rope, and also that large basket. You'll find them all behind the counter.'

They remonstrated with him in vain about the utter uselessness of the attempt, but he was determined, and when a man like Charlie Terrapax, who was a giant in strength and a first-class athlete, besides his other many noble qualities, is determined, it would take a large body of men to prevent him carrying out his projects. Several of the others including Burton, now volunteered, they being inspired by his courage and led by his example; but he calmly but firmly told them he would make the attempt alone. He immediately set about it in a most practical manner. First he unrolled the two clothes lines, then tied the end of one to the end of another which he secured round his waist, and then told the men to take hold of the other end, and on no account to let it go, no matter how far he should float down.

'If I should get over safe, mates,' he said, 'tie the line to that rope, then make the other end taut to that big rata there; then I shall pull it over, if I am able, and make it fast to some other tree on the other side. But, hold on a minute, I was forgetting about the basket. Here, Jack, make haste and get a couple of more lines. That's right! Now let us make them fast to the basket, and then to the end of this line which I've got round me. So, now you see, boys, I shall be able to pull the basket across on the rope. I'm ready. If I should fail, just write to that address,' presenting an envelope addressed to a Miss Somebody, 'and tell her how I died. She's a good creature, and I was never fit to clean her shoes, but still I loved her. Shake hands, mates; if I don't get back, remember that Charlie did his best, and no man can do more.'

They all shook hands with the brave fellow, and tears stood in each one's eyes as they listened to his simple but touching speech. Again they tried to dissuade him from rushing into certain death, but all in vain.

'Good-bye, lads!' and into the foaming waters sprang the hero.

The men on the bank held their breath for several seconds in anxious expectation. They felt sure he was dead. But, look, there he is, battling against the mighty current, while logs and branches were all around him, one of which, if it struck him, would cause him to lose his footing. On, on he struggled against the flood, which carried him quickly down despite his brawny arms and powerful swimming. But what availed good swimming in such a mad whirling water? In another moment some mighty rock or tree would surely kill him. But no, he seemed to bear a charmed life. Sometimes he would be thrown three or four feet high so that the men on the shore could see his waist; at other times he would disappear for several seconds, when his mates would imagine that he could never rise again. At last they began to believe that he would succeed. He was more than half-way across now, although he had floated down below them over forty yards; but he had allowed for that, and as he floated away the men walked down the bank so as to allow for the length of the rope. But look, look! O God! Here comes a large pine tree right on to him. It is only twenty yards away. In another second it would be on to him, and he would be dashed to pieces. There, there, it's on him! Poor Charlie has met his fate at last. But, no, what is that? Is that not he on that off branch? Yes, yes, it is. The men saw and wondered in speechless amazement. How did he get there? Were the lines not tangled in the branches? Yes, they were, but Charlie had somehow managed to get them free. Miracle of miracles, the tree is being swept to the other side. In less time than it takes to relate the fact the tree on which Charlie could be seen was stranded on the opposite shore about sixty yards below Burton's hut. When they saw Charlie safe on the other side, these untought diggers took off their hats and fell on their knees and thanked their Maker for having preserved the daring man, who had so boldly ventured his life to save others from miserable destruction. Charlie on the other side did not kneel down, for he saw that if he wished to save the woman and her children he had not a moment to lose; but still he thanked his God fervently for his preservation.

During that terrible swim Charlie had been bruised and knocked about in a dreadful manner. He was sore all over; blood was flowing from his head, back, left thigh, and breast copiously; and he had broken three of his ribs. Though in this afflicting and trying state he had yet much to perform. It was even a matter of great danger to reach the hut from where he stood. First of all he pulled the rope over, and with much difficulty fastened it to a large birch, and also made taut the line which was attached to the basket on the other side. This accomplished, he made his way to the Burtons. He found them in a state of despair. The water in the hut was already two feet high, and the poor wife, who was highly enceinte, and her three children, had taken refuge on the table, and sat there, their hands clasped in prayer.

Charlie readily recognised the dangerous and delicate position of Mrs Burton, and made up his mind that she should be the first to send across, but she would not listen to his good advice, and refused to go until the children were first safe. He remonstrated with her, and told her that she was only acting in justice to her family by first leaving; but the fond mother insisted so much that he promised to send the two little girls across the rope, then come for her, and then take care of her who, being nine years old, was capable of taking care of herself until Charlie returned. The hero then took the two girls in his arms and endeavored to make his way to the rope, but he soon found that the unstable state of the ground would not permit of his carrying more than one child at a time, so he had to return. He left the second girl with her mother, and then made his way to the place where he had fastened the rope. This journey of about sixty yards was attended with much difficulty, for here and there moved small and large logs, roots of trees, and other debris, and besides all this, there were innumerable little holes into which he would now and then stumble, being almost precipitated into the water. At last the tree was reached, and Charlie pulled the basket over to him by means of his line. The shrieking child, who was naturally much frightened by the thundering of the waters and the peculiarity of her position, was then placed into the basket, and, lest the poor child should fall out by any untoward fear or shaking, tied well in by Charlie. He gave a signal to the men on the other side, who slowly pulled the basket and its precious charge to them. In a few minutes she found herself safe in the arms of her father. Charlie did not wait to see how she arrived, but hastened back for the other girl. Again he made the daring passage successfully. When he returned for the third time to fetch the suffering woman, she begged of him to take her boy first, but Charlie was obstinate, for he felt his strength